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Foreign Reaction to the MRA Play "The Vanishing Island"

On 1 September 1955 the Moral Rearmament Group's so-called "Statesmen's Mission" completed a three-month tour of the Far and Middle East. The reaction of most of the Asian countries to this tour, as reported from their own press and other sources, would indicate that the impact of the MRA ideological play, "The Vanishing Island", was only incidental to the greater interest elicited by the visit of the group itself. The arrival of the one hundred eighty-odd members of the mission in each country was the occasion for official and social receptions on the highest publicity level; performances of the play tended to be written up more as social events than as the subject of dramatic or ideological criticism. Among the audiences themselves, the period of confessions by the various national representatives among the mission, seemed to evoke more admiration than did the play itself.

The quality of the production of the play was everywhere appreciated. Music, staging and individual performances were decidedly professional. Even though audiences were, on the whole, representative only of the privileged classes in the various countries, there is some question of how completely the rhymed English text of the play could have been understood. Perhaps that is the reason why there was so little serious criticism of the play and its message in the vernacular press, and why the personal reactions of Asians seemed seldom to attain the level of irritation and vehemence characteristic of many Americans who saw the play on this Asian tour.

Most of the publicity attendant upon both the MRA mission's visit and the performances of "The Vanishing Island" bears the earmarks of careful prior build-up. The mission seems to have been preceded, like Barnum and Bailey's circus, by press agents whose duty it was to make necessary arrangements and arouse interest in the appropriate quarters. The four-page supplement devoted to the MRA tour, in the 25 June 1955 issue of the Nippon Times, Tokyo English-language daily, for example, is made up almost entirely of MRA publicity hand-outs, advertisements by Japanese firms engaged in foreign trade,

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and photographs of celebrities concerned with the visit of the mission. A rather brief and laudatory account of "The Vanishing Island" in this supplement speaks more about the dedication of the performers than about the message of the play. This account says in part: "Since 'The Vanishing Island' was given in a foreign language, and in verse and song, most of the audience could not have been expected to understand every detail, or perhaps grasp the full meaning of 'Changs', which is the spiritual revolution of MRA." By contrast, a comment on the play and on the MRA visit, by a columnist in the vernacular Asahi Shimbun, most important of Tokyo's daily newspapers, and the chief source of information about MRA for most of Japan's reading public, had this to say:

A one hundred-eighty member Moral Rearmament Association mission has arrived in Japan and has given performances of a musical play.... This movement's creed of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, and its ideal of international good will are very fine, and it finds a considerable number of supporters among noted persons in our country.

As far as Japan is concerned, however, this movement is limited to a part of the upper class, and it does not seem to have any tie with the general public. It is fine that persons with the title of "former Premier" or "Company Director" go to the MRA Headquarters in Switzerland at its invitation, and return home deeply impressed by its religious atmosphere. It seems, however, that some of these persons are using this movement as a mere excuse for trips abroad. In that event, the movement is serving a social function, but it can hardly develop into a great moral movement.... At present it seems that the people feel even antipathy toward this movement because it is being participated in by the upper class. It cannot grow into a powerful movement unless it melts into the masses instead of giving them the impression that the movement is hard to approach. The members of the visiting mission are being quartered at the homes of Japanese connected with the MRA movement...

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since many notable Japanese have been taken care of during their trips abroad. For this reason, there is the fear that the members of the mission will see only the homes of the upper class, and will draw erroneous conclusions about the current situation in Japan.

In Madras, the MRA visit, and the play, received a rather cool reception, provoked, in the opinion of our diplomatic representative there, by the insistence of the MRA group on attempting to identify Indian leaders with the MRA platform, pressure them into attending MRA functions, and take advantage of their hospitality and pocketbooks. One of the few Asian reviews to deal critically with the message of "The Vanishing Island" appeared in the Madras newspaper Swatantra, the most intellectually sophisticated journal of South India. The review said, in part:

...It is not possible to consider, appreciate or criticize "The Vanishing Island" as just a play. It is the latest attempt of the Moral Rearmament movement at dramatic articulation, and has to be judged as such...."The Vanishing Island" is not a first-rate play; it is not even one which just fails to make the grade. It is mediocre and ordinary. The main reason for this is its constant preoccupations with its message about "a new type of man" and "a still small voice". It has no characters; there are only some types. It has no theme or story; it has only a moral. But its most inexcusable fault is its childish approach. No play which underestimates the intelligence of its audience to this extent can ever hope to succeed.

Publicity for the play was extensive. In Karachi, for instance, engraved invitations were sent out to thousands of Government officials, prominent businessmen, high Pakistani officials and members of the diplomatic corps. Brochures containing testimonials to MRA and a brief explanation of the moral of "The Vanishing Island" accompanied the invitation. The invitations were worded to imply delicately that, while tickets for the play were

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free, donations would be welcome; there were even reports that seat locations might depend on the size of the donation. In Karachi, as almost everywhere else, the cast of "The Vanishing Island" made its greatest hit with its audiences by singing a song especially composed for the occasion, and in the local language.

The presentation of "The Vanishing Island" was accompanied by every effort to imply that the message of the play was sponsored by the United States, and by the leaders of practically every Asian nation. Not only the use of U.S. Air Force planes for transportation, which Asians believed indicated U.S. support, but also the effort by MRA leaders to present the crews of these planes as being part of the MRA group, was calculated to convey the idea of U.S. sponsorship. What were originally simply polite invitations on the parts of national leaders for the MRA group to visit the various Asian countries in the course of their trip were represented as sponsorship and support for MRA principles. Polite words of welcome by some national leader would be quoted as evidence of that leader's adherence to MRA views. In every country, a message from three important members of the U.S. House of Representatives, Speaker Sam Rayburn, Minority Leader Joseph W. Martin, Jr., and Majority Leader John McCormack, was read as assuring American sponsorship for the MRA trip and the message contained in its play.

In general, then, it may be said that "The Vanishing Island" was presented with an accompaniment of careful prior press-agentry, with a shrewd knowledge of the name-value of prominent leaders in every country, and with strong overtones wherever possible, of United States sponsorship. In the opinion of many Americans who saw the play, "The Vanishing Island" conveys an erroneous and harmful picture of western democracy, a more attractive picture of Communism, and a shallow and meretricious recipe for solving the differences between democracy and Communism. It is a relief, to realize that the MRA "Statesmen's Mission" and its play were directed at a very exclusive audience, most of whom were already conditioned toward MRA ideas or western associations. The general Asian public escaped contact with a special point of view which it would be alarming to think might be interpreted as officially that of the United States.